

USDA Community Food Security Initiative Action Plan

What We'll Do

Seeking to cut hunger in America in half by the year 2015, the USDA Community Food Security Initiative is creating and expanding grass-roots partnerships that build local food systems and reduce hunger.

How We'll Do It

USDA is joining with States, municipalities, nonprofit groups, and the private sector to strengthen local food systems by replicating best practices of existing efforts and by catalyzing new community commitments to fight hunger.

Goals We'll Target

- 1) Creating new—and enhancing existing—**local infrastructures** to reduce hunger and food insecurity
- 2) Increasing **economic and job security** by helping low-income people obtain living wage jobs and attain self-sufficiency
- 3) Strengthening the **Federal nutrition assistance safety net** by supporting the full and efficient use of programs such as food stamps, WIC, school meals, summer feeding, and TEFAP
- 4) Bolstering **supplemental food provided by nonprofit groups** by aiding food recovery, gleaning, and food donation programs
- 5) Improving community **food production and marketing** by aiding projects that grow, process, and distribute food locally
- 6) Boosting **education and awareness** by increasing efforts to inform the public about nutrition, food safety, and food security
- 7) Improving **research, monitoring, and evaluation** efforts to help communities assess and strengthen food security

Methods We'll Use

Catalyzing the development of new **partnerships** on the local, State, and Federal levels to help communities reduce hunger.

Improving the **coordination** between existing USDA programs—such as nutrition assistance programs, community food grants, ongoing research, farmers' markets, and food recovery projects—and related Federal, State, and community initiatives.

Expanding **technical assistance** to States, communities, and nonprofit groups to build long-term local structures to increase food security.

Increasing **public awareness** of the causes of food insecurity and highlighting innovative community solutions to hunger.

BACKGROUND

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Individual and Household Food Insecurity in the United States

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■ Definition of Food Security

The U.S. Action Plan on Food Security defines “food security” as: “When all people at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient food to meet their dietary needs for a productive and healthy life.” There are three key elements to food security:

- Physical and economic access to food by individuals and households
- Adequate availability of food
- Full utilization of food; a balanced, adequate diet; safe water; sanitation; education; and health care

When communities lack one or more of the factors that create food security, they are considered “food-insecure” or suffer from “food insecurity.” Hunger and undernutrition are the potential results and symptoms of food insecurity.



BACKGROUND

■ Individual and Household Food Insecurity in the United States

A 1998 study by USDA indicated that about 36 million Americans—including 14 million children—lived in households that suffered from either hunger or food insecurity. About 10 million of these individuals—of whom 3.4 million were children—lived in households that suffered directly from hunger, in which family members sometimes went without food because they could not afford to obtain it. The remaining 26 million individuals lived in households that suffered from a lesser level of food insecurity, but were frequently only one or two set-backs away (such as losing a job, getting sick, a car breaking down, etc.) from going hungry.

A 1998 study by the Second Harvest Food Bank Network (*Hunger 1997: The Faces and the Facts*) indicated that over 21 million Americans obtain supplemental food from food pantries and hot-meal programs. While hunger and food insecurity occur throughout America—and impact people of all races, religion, and ages—they particularly affect the following groups of people:

- The working poor
- Senior citizens
- Children in poverty
- Residents of low-income inner cities and isolated rural areas
- The homeless
- Single-parent households
- Immigrants affected by welfare reform

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■ Community Food Insecurity in the United States

Historically, both public and private anti-hunger efforts have tended to focus on hunger at the individual and household levels. However, increasingly, additional efforts are focusing on the community level. “Community” is defined very broadly and encompasses urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods, wards, villages, towns, cities, and counties. While the term “Community Food Insecurity” is relatively new and continues to evolve, it generally denotes a community in which there is significant individual and household food insecurity, undernutrition, or hunger, and where components of the community’s food system “from field to fork” have developed significant gaps. Food-insecure communities often share a variety of traits:

- Low levels of individual income, family assets, affordable housing, educational attainment, and local government resources—as well as high levels of crime, violence, teenage pregnancy, and substance abuse—together weaken community structures and foster feelings of community helplessness
- A decline in the viability of small and medium-size farms and the breakdown of the traditional ties between such farmers and the community
- Government and private support services have failed to fully adapt to the large-scale changes in community as a result of welfare reform
- Many community residents must travel significant distances—often without the help of appropriate transportation—to purchase the freshest foods at the lowest prices and to obtain the best paying jobs
- Federal, State, county, city, and private programs are not well coordinated
- Nonprofit groups lack the infrastructure to safely and efficiently recover and distribute the vast amounts of excess, wholesome food that are discarded each day

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■ The United States Responds

At the World Food Summit in Rome in 1996, the United States, along with 186 other countries, committed to the goal of reducing global undernutrition by half by the year 2015. In order to reach this goal, each country agreed to create a national plan of action. The United States reached beyond the goal set in Rome. In the *U.S. Action Plan on Food Security*, the United States set a goal of halving the root causes of hunger: food insecurity.

■ National and Community Food Security Efforts That Work

Throughout the Nation, a wide variety of government and private programs daily prove their effectiveness in combating hunger and increasing community food security (see USDA's Community Food Security Initiative Inventory). At the national level:

- **The Food Stamp Program** puts food on the table for 18 million low-income Americans
- **The WIC Program**, with over 7 million participants, makes sure young children, newborns, and pregnant women get the nutrition they need
- **The School Lunch Program** ensures that 26 million children do not have to learn on empty stomachs

Other Federal programs provide school breakfasts, directly feed senior citizens, provide after-school snacks for children, and provide commodities to food banks, food pantries, and hot-meal programs. In addition, local groups have reported great success utilizing a wide variety of community-based tools, including:

- **Food policy councils** that assess the community food system's strengths, identify gaps, and coordinate local efforts

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- **Farmers' markets** (including the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program) that help small farmers earn income and consumers obtain fresh produce
- **Assets development programs** that assist low-income families in saving funds to pay for obtaining additional education, purchasing a home, or starting a business
- **Food recovery and gleaning projects** that ensure safe, wholesome excess food goes to feed the hungry
- **Community gardens and farms** that help neighborhoods grow their own food
- **Food-buying cooperatives** that help families save money by pooling food purchases
- **Farm-to-school efforts** that help farmers sell products directly to school meals programs
- **"Community kitchens" and micro-enterprise projects** that combine job training and small business development with addressing local food needs

The effectiveness of any of the tools listed is enhanced when they are utilized in an integrated way that forms partnerships incorporating the Federal Government, State and local governments, nonprofit groups, and the private sector. Some States and communities, such as Connecticut, are starting to coordinate tools in a comprehensive way.

However, unlike in Connecticut, many communities lack an integrated strategy and approach to addressing hunger and food security. The goal of USDA's Community Food Security Initiative is to provide these communities the means to build upon existing efforts and resources while eliminating gaps in their food systems.

Connecticut's Food Policy Council: Planning for Statewide Food Security

In Connecticut, the 1997 legislature took the first step toward addressing the State's long-term food security issues by establishing the Connecticut Food Policy Council. Connecticut is the first State to create a permanent body to develop a plan and to coordinate public efforts to achieve food security.

Anti-hunger and food system advocates led the early efforts to establish a Council, aided by a few State legislators. An ad hoc food security committee and later a State-appointed taskforce were formed.

Through a process of research, hearings, and input from all the major sectors of the State's food system, the Food Security Committee and taskforce concluded that sufficient cause existed for State policymakers to give food security planning and coordination the same attention they give issues like housing, transportation, and the environment.

Their research made the following observations:

- The State's food industry was diverse and a significant contributor to the economy
- Hunger and malnutrition were well documented and significant in size and scope
- Development pressures and poor planning had contributed to a rapid decline in farmland and farming
- Affordable supermarkets were hard to find in urban areas
- As many as 10 separate State agencies addressed one or more facets of the food system, spent half a billion dollars annually on food programs and services, and, perhaps most importantly, rarely coordinated their work on food system issues

In response to these findings, the legislature created the Connecticut Food Policy Council. The Council is comprised of representatives from six State agencies and six representatives of the private food sector, including food banks, anti-hunger groups, farmers, retailers, wholesalers, and academia. To date, the Council has produced "A Guide to Community Food Security," sponsored a conference to identify new farmland protection practices in Connecticut; examined State legislation, budgets, and operations related to food security; and assisted in leveraging State funds to bring a new chain supermarket and 250 jobs to a low-income neighborhood.

Through collaboration, policy, and public education, Connecticut is building the foundation for Connecticut's long-term food security.

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■ **USDA Community Food Security Initiative**

Why Is It Needed?

USDA funding sources and technical assistance for community food security activities are spread across more than a dozen different USDA agencies.

Given that each USDA agency has a different mission area, chain of command, institutional culture, and field structure, it is critical to coordinate these diverse agency efforts into one integrated plan of action to increase community food security. Thus, the first major thrust of the Initiative will be to ensure better coordination between USDA agencies that work on related activities. Whenever possible, the Initiative will also dovetail its efforts into relevant activities carried on by other Federal agencies, such as the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, and Transportation.

The new Initiative will also ensure that USDA will play an important leadership role in the growing national community food security movement by providing technical assistance, national attention, and, when appropriate, limited seed money to such efforts—in a manner that allows the Department to improve efficiency and responsiveness, reduce duplication, and build innovative public/private partnerships.

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What Will It Do?

The Community Food Security Initiative is a USDA cross-mission-area initiative. Its goal is to help communities build their local food systems, reduce hunger and food insecurity, improve nutrition, and move low-income families from poverty to self-sufficiency. USDA will partner across traditional agency lines and with States, communities, nonprofit groups, and private companies to achieve this goal.

The Initiative will utilize four main methods of aiding communities:

1. Catalyzing the development of new **partnerships** on the local, State, and Federal levels to help communities reduce hunger and food insecurity
2. Improving the **coordination** between existing USDA programs—such as nutrition assistance programs, community food grants, ongoing research, farmers’ markets, and food recovery projects—and related Federal, State, and community initiatives
3. Expanding **technical assistance** to States, communities, and nonprofit groups to build long-term local structures to increase food security
4. **Educating the public** by using the “bully pulpit” to increase public awareness of the causes of food insecurity and highlight innovative community solutions to hunger

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Four Methods To Achieve Our Goals

USDA:

- Catalyzing new partnerships
- Improving coordination of USDA programs
- Expanding technical assistance
- Educating the public



Through these methods, the Initiative will help the Federal Government, State, and local governments, the private sector, nonprofit groups, and private citizens work together at the local level to develop innovative partnerships to improve America's nutritional status and assist low-income Americans in moving from poverty to self-sufficiency.

